THE NEED FOR INNOVATION IN TEACHING THE DIDACTICS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract: Our paper is an attempt to identify ways to innovate and improve the teaching of the discipline of the Didactics of Foreign Languages (DFL). We shall present the status of Didactics as a discipline in the curriculum of Romanian and foreign universities, through a comparative approach. We shall discuss the teaching of Didactics in relation to the students’ teaching practice, as well as the concepts of ‘cutting-edge teaching’ and ‘leading-edge learning’. The main aim of this paper is to answer the following question: How can we teach the discipline of the Didactics of Foreign Languages in a more innovative and attractive way, so as to help students – prospective teachers of English and French – achieve a smoother transition from the ‘profession’ of student to that of teacher?

Keywords: innovation, DFL, teaching practice, cutting-edge teaching, life-long-learning

I. Introduction

I.1. The Didactics of Foreign Languages across different world curricula

In Romania, the Didactics of Foreign Languages is a discipline included in the study programme called the Psycho-Pedagogical Module, provided by the Pre- and In-Service Teacher Training Departments that are part of the academic structure of Romanian universities. The Psycho-Pedagogical Module comprises two levels of training for prospective teachers in Romania: Psycho-Pedagogical Training Courses for B.A/ B.Sc. Students (graduation certificate – level 1 that enables students to become teachers for grades 1-8) and Psycho-Pedagogical Training Courses for M.A/ M.Sc. Students (graduation certificate – level 2 that enables students to become teachers for grades 9-12/13).¹ Enrolment in and attendance to the level 2 of the

psycho-pedagogical training courses requires that students have attended and graduated level 1. Besides other disciplines included in the curriculum of the levels of psycho-pedagogical training mentioned above, the discipline of the Didactics of Foreign Languages (DFL, also called the Didactics of the Specialization) for the students attending the specializations of the Faculty of Letters, is allotted two semesters, the 2nd semester of the 2nd year and the 1st semester of the 3rd year of study, 2 hours/per week for lectures and 2 hours/per week for seminars. In agreement with the specializations attended by the students at the Faculty of Letters (Romanian-English, English-French and Romanian-French), the DFL includes the Didactics of the English Language, the Didactics of the French Language and the Didactics of Romanian Language and Literature. This means that, for example, the Didactics of the English Language is allotted one semester of study, namely a total of (only) 28 hours of lectures and 28 hours of seminars. In the undergraduate teacher education programmes of study, the discipline of Didactics discusses aspects related to the teaching of a certain discipline in terms of teaching methods, teaching aids, evaluation and assessment, class management, types of classroom interaction, the student’s needs, various approaches to the educational process, conflict resolution in educational settings.

Across Europe, teacher training is achieved through a variety of educational programmes, nevertheless usually affiliated to universities. The curricula for teacher training also varies across countries, but there may be identified some major themes on which teacher training focuses: basic knowledge in education-related aspects (philosophy, history and sociology of education, educational psychology); skills in using teaching and evaluation methods, using technology in the process of teaching-learning, supporting students with special needs; teacher training or practice at classroom teaching, usually supervised and supported by senior teachers. Some universities include colleges of education2, faculties of education3 or institutes of education (Taberrer, 2013).4 Although European countries have moved to the Bologna process, a result of the universities’ autonomy in designing their curricula is that there is no teacher education curriculum shared by all the member states of Europe; also due to university autonomy, there is neither a curriculum for teacher education shared by all the universities in the same country. In the USA, the situation is similar: American universities, as well as various national agencies

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providing education and support for teachers, offer a diversity of teacher education programmes and courses, adapted to the educational level and subject matter of the possible candidates for obtaining teacher certification.\(^5\)

As far as the discipline of Didactics is concerned, it does not occur under such a name in the curriculum for teacher education in other countries. Instead, the various accredited educational units providing teacher education mentioned above include, for example, courses such as: Reflections on learning (3 credits – a course on the psychological, sociological and anthropological theories and assumptions about teaching and learning in and out of school), a course that has to be covered by those who want to become certified elementary teachers in the state of Michigan.\(^6\)

Our brief investigation into the position of Didactics as a discipline in the teacher education curriculum across the world supports us in formulating the following conclusions: Didactics seems to be a separate discipline only in the Romanian curriculum for teacher education; compared to the content of the disciplines included in the teacher education curricula from other countries, it appears to us that the syllabus for the discipline of Didactics comprises too much information to be passed on to students and acquired by them, in only two semesters of study (trends and approaches in education, teaching-learning-evaluation methods and strategies, classroom and conflict management, educating students with special needs, teachers’ roles etc. in only 112 hours of lectures and seminars); instead, the teacher education curricula of other countries seem to approach didactics-related aspects and issues in a more open and wider context, providing courses such as: “Human diversity, power and opportunity in social institutions” – 3 credits, comparative study of schools and other social institutions, social construction and maintenance of diversity and inequality, political, social and economic consequences for individuals and groups; “Literacy, Learners and Learning in Context” – 3 credits, language and literacy development in sociocultural context at the elementary level, natural and socially constructed differences among learners, how to learn about a child, ten components of literacy, assessment, reading or writing related disability; “Teaching of Science to Diverse Learners - Elementary” – 3 credits, teaching science to diverse learners at the elementary


level, inquiry into the construction of subject-specific meaning, science subject matter adapted to learner diversity, teachers’ roles, including professional, intellectual and socio-political responsibilities.  

These findings support the motivation of our paper, namely proposing a model to meet the need for innovation in teaching the DFL in Romania.

I.2. Cutting-edge teaching and leading-edge learning

In order to be able to propose a model for innovating the teaching of the DFL in Romania we need to look at how this discipline or aspects related to it are taught in other countries, as well as highlight certain key words and concepts that may support us in generating possible ideas for building the respective model. We shall briefly highlight such concepts below.

First and foremost, we should draw the distinction between innovation and invention. Invention means creating something new in a certain domain. Innovating means “giving that creation social space” (Cros & Adamczewski, 1996: 10): this implies stopping and analysing the characteristics and qualities of a new practice, the process of its implementation, its implications and how the actors involved – in our case – in the educational process react to it (acceptance, rejection of innovation), its strong and weak points (for example, whether the innovation generates harmony or conflict) and whether the innovation may be further improved.

Didactic innovation should not be mistaken for technological innovation. While didactic innovation is supported by technological innovation, these two concepts are neither synonymous nor do they occur simultaneously in the classroom. Didactic innovation may translate into, for example, institutional targets (e.g. teaching students and their families about ICT in education), or integrating new technologies in all subjects (e.g. WebQuests and WonderPoints, designed by Bernard Dodge and adopted by many teachers in several countries), designing new organizations (e.g. teachers’ networks, such as iEARN), implementing new ways for evaluating or assessing performance (e.g. with rubrics and feedback protocols), identifying and using new teaching resources (e.g. interactive infographies) (Libedinsky, 2014: 3).

We cannot discuss didactic innovation without mentioning professional didactics. Professional didactics approaches professional development from a temporal perspective and that of enhancing competency: it adopts work and situation analysis as a main method in order to improve and ensure (the design of) training (Pastré, 1999). The three main objectives of professional didactics are: to analyse work in the domain of didactics and develop training (Mayen, 1998; Pastré, 1999; Vidal and Samurçay, 1998); to achieve greater control of various situations by approaching them as problems to be solved; to describe professional situations, competencies and transpose work situations into training situations (Vidal and Samurçay, 1998: 118). In order to be able to pursue these objectives, professional didactics resorts to a conceptual frame based on three different and complementary domains, namely Piagetian developmental psychology, ergonomic and work psychology, and the didactics relative to the disciplines (Habboub and Lenoir, 2011: 13).

The concepts of cutting-edge teaching, leading-edge learning and metacognitive skills are closely interconnected. Cutting-edge teaching does not necessarily mean using the latest technology in the classroom – although computers and laser-pointers can be effective – but rather teachers being aware of how the brain works and “being willing to explore, develop and experiment with new teaching techniques” (Bennet, 2015). Mobile devices, online resources and interactive technologies are already transforming the way we access information and ideas. In this context, the teachers’ job is no longer (only) to distribute information, but to form and build metacognitive skills that enable the students to evaluate, use and extend information. Good teachers teach students how to make sense of the great amount of information found on the Internet. In order to be innovative, teachers (as well as schools) should aim at the following three objectives: make technology work for learning; constantly (re)consider how students learn; differentiate/ individualize teaching.

Professional development and improvement is not enough without self-initiative in this respect, which leads us to highlighting another concept that is relevant for our paper: metacognition. Metacognition designates the awareness, analysis and knowledge that a person

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8 http://www.cuttingedgeteaching.com/05_FormatsPage/ProgramFAQ.html#cuttingedge
has of his/ her cognitive (learning, thinking) processes. The term ‘metacognition’ was coined by American developmental psychologist John Flavell (1979), who defined it as knowledge about cognition and control of cognition. Teachers should engage in metacognition with regard to their own life-long learning habits; the reflection upon one’s constant learning process should be correlated with a constant search for improving one’s teaching practices. In other words, teachers, not only students, should be trained to engage in metacognitive activities on a regular basis, with regard to their own learning/ professional development, as well as their teaching strategies and methods.

Besides critical thinking and communication skills, teachers should strive to build the students’ self-education and metacognitive skills. Self-education and metacognitive skills ensure lifelong learning. Leading-edge learning means that students exceed their own expectations, pursue their intellectual passions and search for new information territories by resorting to and relying on their thinking, questioning, researching, communication and leading skills. The cutting-edge teaching approach to education relies on research related to the aspects and scientific domains enumerated below (and not only):

- insight, problem-solving, free will (Cognitive Neuroscience);
- positive priming, emotional regulation in decision-making, attention span, neuroplasticity and rewiring habits (Psychology, Positive Psychology, Social Psychology);
- the role of autonomy in learning (Personal development, Neuroscience);
- the role of stress in learning (Molecular Biology).

All the aspects and scientific domains highlighted above suggest, in fact, the complexity of the teaching-learning process, as well as the various factors impacting it, to name just a few: the students’ age, interests, emotional intelligence, stress levels, memory skills, learning habits, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. All these aspects are also related to the student-centred

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approach to education. We have discussed the student-centred approach to education in a previous paper.\(^\text{11}\)

II. Proposal for innovating the teaching of the Didactics of Foreign Languages

\textit{II.1. Problematic formal aspects in teaching the Didactics of Foreign Languages}

There are certain formal aspects related to how the teaching of the DFL is now conducted in Romanian universities, which demands the implementation of certain changes. The major issue in this respect is the large number of students attending the same lecture and seminar on DFL. This is a consequence of the financial crisis that has started in 2008 and affected educational systems across the world. In 2013, the Romanian Government was forced to apply staff resizing in the budgetary work-force system, including schools and universities. Practically, as a result of these cuts, fewer university teachers have had to meet the teaching needs of classes with larger numbers of students. Another result of financial and teaching-staff cutbacks was the fact that the number of hours allotted for the teaching of DFL (as well as for other disciplines) was reduced to the minimum number of hours legally valid. So, the same content has to be delivered and taught to a larger number of students simultaneously and within a shorter time span.

Therefore, in order to render didactic innovation possible, there should be taken, first and foremost, legal steps to allot more hours to the teaching of the discipline of DFL, as well as to diminish the number of students in a class attending the same lectures and seminars on DFL.

Another problematic aspect related to the teaching of the DFL is the lack of reference literature on the topic of how to teach Didactics. In other words, the goal of Didactics as a discipline is to teach teachers how to teach. But, how should we, university teachers who teach the discipline of Didactics, teach this discipline so that we may rest assured that we have taught it in the best possible way and thus met the needs of prospective teachers?

\textit{II.2. A possible model for innovating the teaching of the Didactics of Foreign Languages}

In order to be worth pursuing and applying, didactic innovation should comply with several criteria; thus, innovation should:
- awaken curiosity in students, stimulate their individual and team creativity, support them in deconstructing conceptual errors, prejudices, stereotypes and oversimplifications;
- promote students’ intellectual autonomy, stimulate students in raising relevant discussion points, establish authentic connections between various domains;
- open new directions for approaching and improving the curriculum, so that it may take into consideration and meet the needs, interests, expectations of students and teachers);
- ‘force’ both teachers and students to engage in metacognitive activities, generate enthusiasm, entertain.

According to Libedinsky (2014:7-8), the first step in innovating teaching practices is the documentation of teaching experiences, described as a process inverse to planning, involving a retrospective attitude and consisting of the systematization of information and relevant evidence about the teaching-learning activities that took place. The documentation of teaching practices is relevant because it “rescues from oblivion” knowledge that is not yet available as text; moreover, the respective knowledge is related to a particular process of transformation in a particular organizational context (Gibbons, 1997: 35). The systematization and documentation of innovative teaching experiences provides an opportunity for professional development for those who undertake it. Moreover, the documentation of teaching experiences helps build reference literature on the theme of knowledge- and experience-based educational practices in educational institutions in contemporary educational systems. There are several reasons for which teachers do not document their teaching practices, namely: they believe documentation is time-consuming; such documentation work is not recognized by the current teachers’ assessment system; some teachers are afraid that their ideas may be plagiarised; some teachers say that they do not know how to do it. A solution to the teachers’ reluctance to document their teaching practices would be to introduce recognition criteria and scores for such work in the teachers’ assessment system. Thus, teachers may be encouraged to document their teaching experiences through qualitative research methodologies: case studies, action-research and the narrative inquiry method.
In line with the ideas discussed above, we believe that a way of encouraging teachers to start documenting their teaching experiences is to have undergraduate students document their teaching practice experiences. In Romania, prospective teachers of English or French undergo a teaching practice stage during their undergraduate studies, which implies observation lessons followed by lessons taught by themselves and evaluated by a mentor. The teaching practice activity is coordinated by a university teacher and guided and assisted by a mentor, a teacher from the pre-university educational system (Boghian, 2014). Therefore, if students were asked to have a teaching practice diary, this would accustom them to the process of reflecting upon their teaching experiences and activities and noting down impressions and ideas related to them. At the end of their teaching practice stage, students would be asked to share ideas from their teaching practice diaries with their classmates, as part of their teaching practice final evaluation. The ideal educational setting related to the teaching of the discipline of Didactics and the coordination of the Teaching Practice stage requires that these two disciplines be taught by the same university teacher. Thus, the students’ reflections and ideas related to their teaching experience and included in their teaching practice diary may be further discussed – and possibly applied – during the seminars on Didactics. From such an innovative activity, both students and teacher would benefit.

Another step in innovating the teaching of the discipline of DFL would be to identify the learning styles of the students-prospective teachers by applying a learning-style questionnaire (see Annex 1 for sample questions that may be included in such a questionnaire) at the beginning of the academic semester in which the discipline of DFL will be taught. Identifying the students’ prevailing learning-styles may provide insight into the best teaching methods to be used by the teacher; moreover, in time, the results of such learning-style questionnaires may reveal certain learning patterns and hence provide clues on how to innovate teaching.

Another step in innovating the teaching of the discipline of DFL concerns possible effective changes in how lectures are conducted. It is difficult to find attractive ways to present information during lectures that may actively engage students in the teaching-learning process, first and foremost because there is a large amount of content to be transmitted during a lecture and subsequently applied and used in practice during seminars by the students themselves. Whereas presentation is a good method for transmitting large chunks of information to large
numbers of students, it is also unattractive, most often than not boring or, at least, challenging to the ordinary attention span possibilities of common students. On the other hand, teaching methods such as debates or the jigsaw technique, although efficient in actively engaging students in learning, present two major disadvantages: they are difficult to apply to classes with large numbers of students and inefficient with respect to the amount of information transmitted, as well as time-consuming.

In this case, innovating the teaching of the discipline of DFL translates as finding ways to actively engage students in learning during lectures, not only during seminars. Again, meeting this requirement implies, first and foremost, the identification of the prevailing learning styles of the students attending the lectures and seminars on DFL. For example, some students prefer to process information actively most of the times, others through introspection and reflection, whereas others resort to all these processes in filtering content.

If we want to innovate our teaching style, we should ask ourselves, upon entering the classroom, the following question: “If there were no students in the room, could I do what I am planning to do?” – a piece of advice from Gen. Ruben Cubero, Dean of the Faculty at the United States Air Force Academy.12 In other words, teachers should constantly attempt to find ways of teaching the learning content to the students and together with the students. To achieve this objective, there are teaching methods that engage students in the act of teaching and learning at the same time. For example, the reciprocal thinking technique or the method of mutual teaching (Ilie, 2014: 127-129). This method – theorized by Palinscar in 1986 – implies dividing the students into groups of mutual teaching and learning; each group of students is assigned the task of studying a certain amount of learning content and then teaching that information to the other students. Already applied by us during the lectures of the discipline of DFL, the method of mutual teaching has clearly displayed its advantages: students acquire and consolidate information better in the process of teaching other students about that information; the method builds important thinking operations, namely analysis, synthesis, concretization, generalization; it also stimulates attention, communication skills as well as active listening; it motivates students to get actively engaged in learning by turning them into the main actors of the teaching-learning process; it assists students in expanding their attention span as a result of the novelty aspect.

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introduced: new content is taught not by the same teacher/student, but by a different teacher/student, in a different teaching style (hence, the boredom resulted from listening to the same person teaching in a certain style is eliminated and replaced by enhanced curiosity); besides the information content taught by students to their peers, students also watch and learn new teaching methods and styles. Other interactive methods include the gallery walk, effective discussion and concept sketches, case studies and just-in-time-teaching.

Studies have also connected the innovation of didactics with problem-solving (Libedinsky, 2014; Habboub and Lenoir, 2011; Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2009), as well as with the use of WebQuests, WonderPoints and spaced learning. Spaced learning, briefly defined as 8-minute lessons – appears to be more suitable to younger students and has already been implemented in some schools with successful outcomes.13 A WebQuest is “an inquiry-oriented lesson format in which most or all the information that learners work with comes from the web.”14 Briefly, WebQuests can be created by using various programs, but the easiest way of building them is with the help of a simple word processing document that includes links to websites. Given the fact that the students attending the disciplines of the Psycho-Pedagogical Module with a view to becoming teachers in the near future need to become familiarised with various and numerous aspects related to the teaching career – including the National law of education and other official documents that regulate entrance into the teaching career and teacher professional development and promotion – we believe that WebQuests may be of real help in this respect. Usually, students ask the teacher who teaches the discipline of Didactics quite a large number of questions related to the entire process of becoming a teacher, partly because entering the teaching profession is conditioned by passing the tenure examination. For example, the tenure examination for graduates who want to become teachers of English comprises subjects on the English literature and language, as well as subjects on the methodology of teaching English as a second language. Moreover, students may miss lectures and therefore the same questions may be asked over and over again by students who missed the introductory lecture on

Didactics. Using a WebQuest lesson format for the introductory lecture on DFL would be highly useful and practical, as it should comprise:
- link to the National Education Law in force;
- links to the institutions responsible with regulating the teaching profession and teacher professional development and training: the Ministry of Education; the county School Inspectorates; the Teaching-Staff Resource Centres;
- links to authorized and official educational sites and portals, that provide official legal documents regulating the conduct of the teaching process: school syllabi for different levels and disciplines, approved by order of ministry; curricula for different levels and disciplines, approved by order of ministry;
- links to universities and departments that support the professional development and promotion of teachers through the study programmes provided, in agreement with the laws in force: for example, the Pre- and In-Service Teacher Training Department from “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău;
- links to free online bibliographic resources related to the discipline of Didactics, as well as to other aspects related to the teaching profession – the bibliographic resources may include books, movies, articles, power-point presentations etc.;
- links to European official documents that regulate the educational process and provide standards in relation to various aspects of the teaching process and student competences and level of skills: for example, the Common European Framework of References for Languages;
- links to national and international institutions and agencies that provide pre- and in-service teacher training and collaboration opportunities, on the basis of national and international competitions or various programmes funded through different financial schemes.

The structure of a WebQuest comprises an introduction, task (a description of what the students will do and produce), process (the steps taken by the students to complete the task), resources (the links already provided by the teacher but also links discovered by the students themselves and added to the initial list – having students identify useful links related to the task forces students to engage in processing and filtering information, not just locating it), evaluation (the standards and criteria according to which the students will be evaluated) and conclusion (reflection and discussions on the overall WebQuest activity). We believe that the most relevant
aspect of using WebQuests in teaching is forcing students to process, filter and select information found on the world wide web; given the vast amount of information available nowadays on the Internet – which even professional researchers have lately experienced as challenging and time-consuming when it comes to filtering and selecting the most reliable and relevant sources – we believe that one of the skills that students should develop during their undergraduate studies is to filter information found on the Internet in as efficient and fast way as possible. Using WebQuests supports us in building such skills at students. Moreover, WebQuests supports teachers in achieving goals such as: building the students’ higher-level thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, self-evaluation, critical thinking; keeping students interested and motivated to work on the task by making the best use of technology and information available online; building the students’ sense of responsibility for their own learning and time management: they work in groups to solve a task in a given amount of time and relying on a series of resources; building the students’ collaboration and communication skills through group work; building the students’ self-confidence by enhancing their sense of autonomy; improving the students’ technological competences; differentiating training by giving students the chance to select their resources according to their interests and needs and produce a customized final product; building transferable skills by supporting students in bridging the gap between school and real life experiences; building coaching skills at students through the roles they have to undertake while solving the task as a group.

### III. Conclusions and discussions

Innovation in teaching the discipline of the DFL should begin, first and foremost, with changes in the laws regulating the number of hours allotted to this discipline in the academic curricula from Romanian universities. The crucial factor in innovating the teaching process with respect to any discipline is the teacher’s desire to implement progress in his/ her professional activity. Beyond the legal regulation that control the educational process – translated as national educational curriculum, discipline syllabi, teachers’ assessment system – innovation in teaching is closely connected to each teacher’s initiative of introducing change in his/ her teaching style and reflecting upon the implications of the respective change. The conclusion of our paper is that innovation in teaching may be defined, nowadays, as the ideal harmonization between the
student-centred approach to education and the responsible use of the educational tools and resources provided by the information and communication technology. Peer collaboration is also highly relevant for innovation to occur, and teachers should be encouraged to share their teaching practices, and be officially rewarded for that.

Our proposal for a model of innovating the teaching of the discipline of DFL comprises the following elements: documentation of teaching experiences; identifying the students’ learning styles and shaping the teaching process according to them; using interactive methods during lectures (the mutual teaching method); using WebQuests during lectures.

Annex 1 – Learning style questionnaire – sample questions

1. When I am learning something new, it helps me to (a) talk about it; (b) think about it.
2. I prefer to get new information in (a) pictures, diagrams, graphs, or maps; (b) written directions of verbal information.
3. In a study group working on difficult material, I am more likely to (a) jump in and contribute ideas; (b) sit back and listen.
4. When I solve math problems (a) I usually work my way to the solutions one step at a time; (b) I often just see the solutions but then have to struggle to figure out the steps to get to them.

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